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SUBJECT: ANTI-SEMITISM IN POLAND: AN UP-CLOSE LOOK

Classified By: DCM Quanrud for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Members of Poland's Jewish community, as well as Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and community activists, question the utility of two recent attitude surveys suggesting a rise in anti-Semitism in Poland. More accurate indicators are the low incidence of anti-Semitic violence and vandalism, and the extent to which Poland promotes Jewish culture and history. That said, interlocutors agree that anti-Semitic stereotypes, jokes, graffiti, and fairy tales are still too prevalent. Poland's political leaders received high marks for philo-Semitic activities, and public discourse has improved on Polish-Jewish issues, but concerns persist that the judiciary and educational system do too little to confront anti-Semitic rhetoric or promote tolerance. Perhaps most unpleasant in this narrative is the fact that anti-Semitism has proven surprisingly enduring in Poland -- outliving a Jewish community that has almost disappeared -- at least in part because of support from within the Polish Catholic hierarchy.
END SUMMARY.

ANTI-SEMITISM IN POLAND ON THE RISE?

12. (U) Two recent surveys report an increase in negative perceptions of Jews in Poland. In a February Anti-Defamation League survey of 500 Poles, 48 percent answered "probably true" to at least three of four anti-Semitic stereotypes presented. According to the survey, the elderly, those without higher education, and persons earning less than 11,000 euros per year were most likely to agree with negative stereotypes presented in the survey. In a September 2008 Pew Research Center survey of 750 Poles, Poland ranked third among 24 European countries in holding negative perceptions of Jews, with 36 percent of respondents expressing a negative assessment, up from 27 percent in 2005.

ATTITUDE SURVEYS OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE

13. (C) In recent months, we have engaged Poland's Jewish community, religious leaders, politicians, journalists, activists, and NGOs on the subject of anti-Semitism in Poland. While interlocutors agreed that anti-Semitism is widespread, they dismissed the notion that it is on the rise. Most questioned the utility of attitude surveys, asserting that anti-Semitism is best measured by focusing on actions -- not just acts of violence or destruction, but also the responses of leaders and communities. Several rabbis pointed out that Polish political leaders are quicker to condemn anti-Semitic acts than their Western European counterparts.

ANTI-SEMITIC VIOLENCE RARE

14. (C) Jewish community members generally agree that acts of violence against Jews are rare in Poland. (NB: This is also a reflection of Poland's small Jewish population. While some estimates place the total number of Jews as high as 50,000, only about 4,000 are active members of Jewish communities).

That said, there are still reports of Polish youth shouting anti-Semitic remarks, occasional cemetery desecrations, and prominent anti-Semitic graffiti. One rabbi argued that youth do not discriminate when it comes to vandalizing cemeteries, insisting that Catholic cemeteries are also commonly targeted. Almost universally, members of the Jewish community told us anti-Semitism is "less dangerous" in Poland than it is in Western Europe. Although Polish courts are generally lenient when it comes to punishing violations of Poland's anti-Semitism laws, many Polish Jews indicated they feel safer in Poland than they would in Germany or France.

HIGH MARKS FOR POLISH LEADERS

15. (C) A large number of Jewish community leaders noted that Poland has more "promoters" of Jewish culture -- e.g., mayors and community leaders who organize Jewish cultural events, film festivals, youth exchange programs, etc. -- than in Western Europe. President Kaczynski and Prime Minister Tusk received high marks for their philo-Semitic activities, e.g., President Kaczynski's awarding of medals to Polish Righteous Among the Nations and his support for project to build the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, to be completed in 2012. Many praised the efforts of Advisor to the Prime Minister -- and Auschwitz survivor -- Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, who belongs on a short list of Poland's most respected leaders. Although he does not have a program budget, he has raised the profile of government efforts to promote dialogue. He has offered strong public backing for NGO activities -- e.g., Open Republic, Foundation for Dialogue Among Nations, Never Again, Humanity in Action-Poland -- to combat xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

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EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS HIT-OR-MISS

16. (C) Although civic education, promotion of equality and tolerance, and Holocaust education are included in Poland's core curriculum for primary and secondary schools, individual teachers and schools decide how best to achieve government-specified goals. As a result, programs vary in their effectiveness, depending on the school's size and resources, and the level of commitment of teachers and administrators. (COMMENT: Many teachers who apply through the Embassy for U.S.-based Holocaust education training cite lack of supervisor support and resources as primary concerns.) Several interlocutors expressed frustration that the Ministry of Education was not more actively involved in pressing schools to devote necessary time and resources to combat xenophobia and promote tolerance, or holding schools accountable if such efforts come up short.

ANTI-SEMITIC FOLKLORE

17. (C) Commentators suggest that Poland's biggest problem is with the prevalence of anti-Semitic graffiti, jokes, stereotypes, and fairy tales. In this respect, Poles sometimes lack due sensitivity: several Jewish community leaders insisted that most Poles do not realize that certain stereotypes or caricatures are offensive, e.g., wooden carvings of Hassidic Jews hugging coins. One researcher described anti-Semitism in Poland as an oil blot floating on the surface of water -- it is not deep, but widespread and difficult to remove. Others noted that lack of exposure to minorities in Poland's homogeneous society leads Poles not to question offensive comments, graffiti, and negative stereotypes. Surprisingly, many Poles still believe Jews have "too much influence" in the country; although few religious Jews remain, prominent sons of Jews include former Prime Minister Mazowiecki and Gazeta Wyborcza editor Adam Michnik. A particularly lurid website speculates on "hidden" Jews within the Polish government.

ANTI-SEMITIC, NOT NECESSARILY ANTI-ISRAEL

¶8. (C) Many Jewish community leaders pointed out that anti-Semitism is not linked to anti-Israeli sentiment. On the contrary, most Poles generally pride themselves on being pro-Israel. Poland was one of the few European countries where there were pro-Israel demonstrations during the Gaza crisis. Although there were protests outside the Israeli Embassy, 95 percent of the protestors were non-Polish, and the Israeli Ambassador to Poland believes there is reason to believe the protests were organized by the Iranian Embassy here. There were no reports of anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic acts during celebrations of the Catholic Church's Days of Judaism -- celebrated in most major Polish cities -- in January.

ANTI-SEMITISM NEVER "DE-LEGITIMIZED" IN POLAND

¶9. (C) According to one Jewish activist, anti-Semitism was never "de-legitimized" in Poland the way it was in France, where anti-Semitic statements were banned after the war. Unlike in France, Polish anti-Semites did not collaborate with the Nazis, since they were also "sub-humans" according to Hitler's racial ideology. Instead, many anti-Semites joined the resistance, and were regarded as heroes. After the war, some branded communism a "Jewish invention" and communist society rarely questioned anti-Semitic stereotypes. As a result, anti-Semitism in France is contained, but runs deep below the surface, while Polish anti-Semitism is widespread but shallow. In fact, the activist maintained, anti-Semitism is more an abstract expression of dissatisfaction than a sign of real hatred.

IMPROVED ATMOSPHERICS ON POLISH-JEWISH ISSUES

¶10. (C) Several interlocutors pointed to the qualitative difference in the debate following the 2008 release in Polish of Jan Gross's "Fear", compared with the 2001 controversy over Gross's book examining the 1941 massacre of Polish Jews in Jedwabne. While the public debate over Jedwabne was heated and emotional, public discussion following the release of "Fear" was much less so. While there was strong criticism, most of it focused on methodology, rather than emotional rhetoric. A sociologist posited that Polish attitudes toward Jews had improved as a result of the "excesses" of Catholic radio station Radio Maryja's anti-Semitic programming. Many Poles thought Father Rydzyk, the station's director, simply went too far.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?

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¶11. (C) Many interlocutors expressed concern that anti-Semitism is still a significant problem in the Polish Catholic Church, one that goes far beyond Father Rydzyk and Radio Maryja, despite the efforts of Pope John Paul II to promote interfaith dialogue. Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the Archbishop of Krakow, Archbishop of Warsaw Kazimierz Nycz, Archbishop of Lodz Wladyslaw Ziolek, Archbishop of Lublin Jozef Zycinski, and others have tried to take on anti-Semitism, with little success. Dziwisz, who views himself as the defender and promoter of the late Pontiff's legacy, was reportedly taken aback by the force of resistance from Polish bishops who either sympathized with Father Rydzyk or were unwilling to take him on. He has since conceded that combating anti-Semitism within the Polish Catholic Church will take generations. Interlocutors also worried that young priests committed to promoting interfaith dialogue are being passed over for positions of higher responsibility. Many seminary students abandon their calling out of disillusionment.

¶12. (C) A strong reason for Church leaders' reluctance to confront anti-Semitism, and Father Rydzyk specifically, is the fear of exposing internal divisions. If made public, such divisions could further jeopardize the moral authority of a Church already accused of high-level collaboration with

the communist regime. High-ranking Church officials argue that even the Vatican lacks the authority to instruct bishops and leaders of autonomous orders, such as Father Rydzyk's Redemptorist order. Instead, they say, they are quietly working to change the Church culture. While many in the Church cite "improvements" in Father Rydzyk's behavior, other opinion leaders argue that media scrutiny has forced only cosmetic improvements at Radio Maryja. Priests on Radio Maryja make much fewer racist comments, but announcers use easily understood code words, and on-air callers continue to make anti-Semitic statements. Rydzyk and other anti-Semitic priests still hold tremendous sway in rural areas.

PROMOTING TOLERANCE

113. (C) The lack of anti-Semitic violence in Poland notwithstanding, the Government, judiciary, and educational system must do more to confront anti-Semitic rhetoric and stereotypes. We continue to stress the need for such undertakings in our dialogue with national and local government officials. In addition, the Embassy provides financial assistance to send Polish teachers to the United States for Holocaust education and co-hosts related training and conferences in Poland. We also promote tolerance by sponsoring conferences and cultural events (e.g., photo exhibitions, film festivals), by conducting outreach through our various speakers programs, and through international visitor programs.

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